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ABSTRACT

In March of 1984, the Kentucky General Assembly revised and approved a senate bill that made kindergarten mandatory beginning with the 1985-86 school year. This paper reviews several national and state research studies which help demonstrate reasons why early education would be beneficial to a student population. Particularly discussed are the results of two national studies, the Consortium on Developmental Continuity and the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, which indicate long-term educational effects. Studies in Kentucky, focusing specifically on the effects of kindergarten attendance on later academic achievement, revealed a significant difference in third and fifth grade achievement test scores between students with and without kindergarten experience. The students with kindergarten experience scored higher at both grade levels in reading, language, math, and total battery. In a study conducted by Paterno and Taylor, the effects of the kindergarten experience on immediate (first grade) academic achievement of rural children was investigated. Results indicated higher scores for kindergarten versus non-kindergarten experienced children in the same four areas. In conclusion, the paper discusses the need for further research and the concern for the effect of mandatory kindergarten on children in Kentucky. (DST)

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MANDATORY KINDERGARTEN: WILL IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN KENTUCKY?

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Abstract

This paper explains the recent legislative act in the state of Kentucky, mandatory kindergarten. Several national and state studies are reviewed which support the theoretical benefits of early education. These types of benefits and how research applies to the Kentucky situation are discussed. Finally, some concerns about the effects of mandatory kindergarten are given and a call for further study is suggested.

Mandatory Kindergarten: Will It Make a Difference in Kentucky?

In March of 1984, the Kentucky General assembly revised and approved a senate bill that made kindergarten mandatory as of the academic year 1985/86 (Committee on Education, 1984). This change in the Kentucky public education system will create an increase in the kindergarten population from a little over 44,000 in the 1983/84 school year to approximately 57,000 for the 1985/86 school year (Office of Statistical Services, 1984). In these days of careful budgeting and increasing educational costs, why would a state create such a mandate where costs would increase? The answer lies within Kentucky's commitment to the increase of quality in education. Early education has been reported by several national and state studies to have lasting benefits. These studies help demonstrate some of the reasons why early education would be beneficial to a student population.

National Studies

In 1977 the Consortium on Developmental Continuity reviewed fourteen infant and preschool experimental educational programs as to the long-term educational effects. The consortium concluded that these programs

reduced probability of being assigned to special education classes and of grade retention. Higher competence in school ratings and significant increases in intellectual functioning were also reported (Lazar, September, 1977, and October, 1977).

In 1979 the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies completed a report of the lasting effects of preschool programs. Twelve independent researchers pooled their independently gathered data to collaborate on over-all results. Some of the researchers were Susan Gray, Ira Gordon, Phyllis Levenstein, and David Weikart. Among the many results contained in this report was the effect of preschool programs on school achievement. Overall, low-income children who had participated in preschool programs scored higher in mathematics. Verbal achievement scores tended to show similar results. Some researchers reported immediate (the first grade) significant differences, while others reported later significant differences in achievement test scores. Those subjects with preschool program training scored higher than those subjects without preschool training (Lazar, 1978, and Lazar, 1979).

Kentucky Reports

These national reports sparked a pragmatic interest in individual states. Most state-wide investigations focused on one particular type of preschool, the kindergarten. The question asked in these studies was: Does kindergarten attendance affect later academic achievement?

Since the kindergarten population was increasing in the state of Kentucky (Jones, 1977), Kentucky launched a similar type of study. It researched the growth, educational impact, and economic significance of its kindergarten program (Springate, 1981). The results of this investigation indicated that there was a significant difference in third and fifth grade achievement test scores between students with kindergarten experience and students without kindergarten experience. The students with kindergarten experience scored significantly higher at both grade levels in the areas of reading, language, mathematics, and total battery.

Although the above mentioned research project demonstrated significant and positive effects of kindergarten experience, the population sample included

both urban and rural students and did not include results of immediate effects. Because of the complications of funding, there remained a need to know more about the effects of kindergarten experience on the first grade achievement test scores of Kentucky's rural children. At that time daily attendance and transportation costs were two of the variables considered when funding Kentucky's kindergartens (Springate, 1981). The thin population density and special transportation difficulties in rural areas may have affected funding and scheduling decisions. Therefore, an investigation of the effects of kindergarten experience on immediate (first grade) academic achievement was needed to focus on the rural student population.

Such an investigation was conducted by Paterno and Taylor. This study investigated differences in achievement test scores of first-grade students with kindergarten attendance and of first-grade students without kindergarten attendance. The first grade achievement test scores from 46 first-grade students from central, rural Kentucky were computed for the study. This population was divided into Group A (students with kindergarten attendance) and Group B

(students without kindergarten attendance). Group A had 12 male and 11 female students. Group B had 11 male and 12 female students. Therefore, each group contained 23 subjects and was very similar in content on the basis of sex. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills test was administered and raw scores in each of four different achievement areas were computed for each subject. These areas were as following: total reading, total language, total mathematics, and total battery. A *t* test was computed on the raw scores of (Group A) and (Group B) in the areas of reading, language, mathematics and total battery. The mean scores of Group A were higher than the mean scores of Group B in all four areas and, as a result of this analysis, significant differences of performance between the two groups were computed as having a probability of type one statistical error of less than or equal to .01 in all four areas (Paterno and Taylor, 1982).

Conclusions

The studies presented in this review present information in strong support for the positive effects of early education but there are still many questions that remain unanswered as to the effect mandatory

kindergarten will have on Kentucky's children. The national studies reported positive effects of many types of early programs which contained many types of student populations. Kentucky is concerned with the effects of kindergarten education in a state mandated and state tested program in a specific geographic location, Kentucky.

Although some studies about the effects of kindergarten were done in the state of Kentucky, much more information is still needed. The effects on certain racial, geographic, and socio-economic population groupings must still be investigated as public school programs offer special classes and benefits to match the needs of these different populations. Transportation costs, especially in the thinly populated and mountainous, rural districts will have a major impact on the scheduling and the funding of these rural kindergarten programs. Will they continue to have half-day programs or will they adopt a whole-day, every-other-day program? Will the expenditures on classrooms, materials, teachers, and testing match the gained quality in education?

There is a call to the state of Kentucky to carefully investigate the full effects of the

kindergarten mandate. Mandatory curriculums, essential skills testing, and required attendance may not accomplish the original goal of quality education for the children in Kentucky. It is feared by many educators that quality in education may be pushed aside by over-crowded classrooms, teaching-for-the-test approach to education, and undesirable scheduling. With patience and careful evaluation, hopefully, the above mentioned concerns will remain just that, mentioned concerns.

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